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FUNDAMENTAL FACTORS IN THE MAKING OF A KINDERGARTEN CURRICULUM

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In the past, most curricula have been made to fit a theology or a philosophy. Today it is almost universally recognized that a curriculum should be made to fit the children who are to be affected by it. It is the crowning glory of the kindergarten that it has generally started its theories and its practice directly with the child and has studied to understand his nature and to meet his needs. Its successes have been based on the wisdom of its founder and on the splendid devotion of the master's followers; its mistakes have been the errors common to human nature.

During the last twenty years we have had a great deal of really scientific study devoted to little children. On the whole, the results of this study agree with the teachings of Frederick Froebel; they restate the earlier discoveries of great educational leaders, with here and there a modification or an addition. This paper seeks to state the fundamental factors in the making of a kindergarten curriculum from the point of view of modern genetic investigations.

If a scientist were set to study a child under six years old, the first thing to strike his attention would certainly be the marvelous activity of the specimen. He wriggles, squirms, gurgles, laughs, claps, creeps, walks, trots and tumbles about. He talks, cries, shouts, and rubs himself into every object he can reach, so that a student like Professor Dresslar is able to write a long

article in merely enumerating the acts of a three-year-old for a half hour.

But the scientist will hunt in vain for any steady axis of organization running through this chaos of doing. This is why all records of infancy, like those of Miss Shinn or of Mrs. Moore, or even the volumes by Preyor, are such uninteresting and almost impossible reading for anyone, except students of childhood. A well-organized mind moves easily along the lines of its normal action; compelled to turn hither and yon in an attempt to follow the accidental movements of a child's mind it is quickly tired out. This is also the reason why any real work with little children is so fatiguing; and it explains the constant struggle between kindergartners and boards of education over the question of double sessions in kindergarten work. It is true that there is little difference between children in the last days of the kindergarten and the first days of the primary grades; but there is a vast difference between kindergarten children and primary children as a whole, and this difference is mainly due to the quality of fragmentariness in the activity and in the attention of the little ones.

The third quality that must strike the scientific observer of little children is their remarkable desire for, and facility in, social intercourse. Even in extreme infancy the baby longs to have someone near him. In his first days, he prefers to lie in a lap rather than in a cushioned crib. Only with protestations and cries will he break his social bonds and voyage off into the lonely land of sleep. In the first year he greets animals and babies as his peers; after the first year any child who seeks solitude is something of a monster. This intelligent interpretation of and response to the social forces about him early marks the child as the master of all living things. He learns quickly whom he can control and how to do it; whom he must obey, and why. At three years old he reads a face as adults read books; and at six he has passed through, and at least partially assimilated, most of the social experiences of life.

This social sensibility makes little children strangely imitative. Whatever any of us thinks that he tends to do; what we think

with admiration tends doubly to pass over into action and hence into conduct. We live by our admirations; and that which we love, we become. Later in life, fixed habits and accepted ideas and ideals will inhibit this imitative tendency, but little children are the prey of all the suggestions that play upon them.

And because a little child is weak and unformed, and his ideas run always before his powers, he seeks to realize himself in imitative play. As I write these pages, three children are playing with a cart on the lawn. They have just made a little journey by sea and so the cart is a ship; the child in front is the captain; the one who pushes behind says he is the sailor; the smallest one, who, because he is the smallest, has been crowded into the back of the cart, cries lustily because he wants to be a sailor. "No," explain the others "you are the passenger; here is your ticket." Already, as I write these words, they have deserted the ship and have gone to play in the garden. Here you have an epitome of young childhood with its activity, its fragmentariness, its social demands, its openness to imitation and its attempt to realize life and prepare for it through imaginative play.

This, then, is the material we have to work upon—an undeveloped human being, active, chaotic, social, and hence imitative, ineffective and so driven to imagine, invent, and play at all sorts of actuality. The curriculum must be made to fit this individual and it must also anticipate and lead toward the life that we wish the child to grow into. That life is very different for different groups of children. It depends largely upon the philosophy, theology, and social and political theories of those who are in charge of the children. A kindergarten in a convent must care most to secure success in the life that follows this one; a select kindergarten in an aristocratic neighborhood will care especially to fit the children for the walk of life to which they have been called by their parents' wealth; a slum kindergarten must always be used as an instrument for improving the slums. In this paper, we shall take it for granted that the kindergarten is secular, democratic, and American.

To train a creature with the qualities we have described it is clear we must depend on his activity for our motive power. It

is a sad thing when a school for little children neglects to train them; it is a sadder thing when it destroys the driving desire to do things. To maintain the hunger for activity we must have a curriculum providing for pretty constant physical play or work. This can be secured in organized indoor games, in industrial exercises, in gardening, in playground exercises, or in excursions. The children's corners in the recreation centers of Chicago are admirably devised to encourage activity, wide sand piles, ample wading pools, with swings and teeters to provide a succession of activities that can be combined in endless variety.

But this activity is merely opportunity for training. Play will keep activity alert, but work must organize this fragmentary activity into significant sequences. A recreation center may be merely a place for discharging unused energy; but a kindergarten must shape life, if it is to justify its existence. Here we meet the universal paradox of education. We must keep initiative unchecked and activity alert, and still shape desire and direct activity to ends that will be of deepest value in life. It is the old struggle of wind and rudder for the control of the ship; without wind, nothing is done; without rudder, no port is gained.

The directive work in the kindergarten, so far as guiding activity is concerned, must lie mainly in the direction of organizing the tyrannical but necessary reflexes that we call habits. Infant education should be mainly concerned with stocking and directing the subconscious nerve centers. The child should learn to walk well, to carry his head erect and his chest well forward, to step lightly, to run and dance, to shake hands, bow, pass articles or move a chair aside. He should learn to articulate clearly, speaking distinctly and agreeably; the pitch of his voice should be properly regulated, and harshness worked out of his tone; he should learn to sing and recite little poems agreeably. Laughing, grimaces, tricks of mouth and eyes, all these should be constantly shaped toward excellence. Wearing the clothes well, eating and drinking properly, should be reduced to habits, and then forgotten.

Of course, if the teacher is stupid she will make the children into self-conscious prigs, into little automata. That is why the

teacher of little children should be wise and carefully trained, well bred and experienced in the usages of good society. The well-to-do have always looked after these matters with great solicitude, and hence they have been able to retain social leadership for themselves and for their children. Some day the children of the people will be trained in this early period, when life-long reflexes are being established, to act like cultivated boys and girls, and the action will strengthen the thoughts and the feelings that make a man truly cultivated. When that time comes, America will have a cultivated and humanized democracy capable of protecting itself against all class aggression and ready to live life with the grace and dignity that human life deserves.

And in the kindergarten all this training of lower nerve centers takes place in a social atmosphere to which the children are fully alive and to which they freely respond. Sympathy, emulation, hope, fear, selfishness, altruism, all the passions that gather round social life and intercourse are available for the teacher who knows how to use them. Hence the work and play must be directed to group activities that will give wide and ordered activity to all the feelings of social life. Just as the child is trained to walk erect, so he must be trained to play the game of life fairly and generously. As he is trained to articulate distinctly, so he must be trained to speak honestly. Most of us are good because we have been trained to be good, and we have the habit.

The teacher, standing as the embodiment of authority, can and should command absolute obedience; in the various combination of the group she will find all the other relations that go to make up our human institutions. The kindergarten is an enlarged and self-conscious home, and a miniature state. So, too, in groups, the industrial games can be carried through all stages of simple production and distribution; while in dramatic combinations, they can figure forth the relations and the crises of life. Probably all sex distinctions had best be, as far as possible, ignored in the kindergarten period. They are far too important in our adult life; they had best wait on older years.

To work out these basal conceptions of industry, society, and life the teacher must depend largely on imitation. All the surroundings of little children's lives should be simple and capable of childish imitation. The teacher should stand and walk well, she should have a cultivated voice and should dress with taste and variety. The kindergarten should look more like a living room than a school; and bad children should be quickly eliminated by making them good. We cannot afford to reform bad children, whether from rich homes or poor, by having them associate with good children four or five years old.

The imagination, as we have said, enables the child to accomplish through play what his powers cannot compass in reality. Hence, industrial games are very effective, but they should always be organized on the basis of some actual observation and experience. That is what imagination can do at this time; it can make observation real, through tactual and muscular experience. Nowhere else does the ordinary kindergarten curriculum lay itself open to graver criticisms than in the imaginative plays. They must be developed directly out of experience, even if they do not recapitulate the experiences of the race.

Dramatic activity, based on imagination, should deal also with the affairs of the home and the neighborhood. And here again they must really appeal to the children as connected with life; otherwise they are not exercises for imagination, but mere mimicry. Instead of gripping the feelings and shaping them, they stultify them. The real life of the homes from which the children come should be represented, but lifted and glorified by the play of imaginative fancy.

On the side of aesthetics we are coming to realize that little children have not the ability to grasp wholes, to feel the charm of proportions and of suggested associations in which all developed art rests. They like brilliant colors and strong sounds and they are especially fond of rhythmic repetition. Dress is the form in which beauty appeals to them most strongly and here it is doubtless blended with egotism, in their own case, or, when others are concerned, with admiration for the wearer. The kindergarten can do little more than give plenty of sense experiences, properly

related, out of which the children in later years may build up forms of beauty.

Institutions have all the selfishness of human beings, with few of their generous impulses. They tend to usurp the proper functions of other related institutions and to gather everything into their own hands. The church illustrated this tendency during the Middle Ages. The public school now tends to take over the functions of the home, the neighborhood and the state itself. But the business of the school should be to supplement the home and related institutions. It is true that the teacher should have a complete philosophy of life in mind to guide her in her work, but in the country village the kindergarten curriculum should give much of what the city home naturally furnishes, while in Boston it should bring the child into contact with what the village child sees daily all about his home.

There are then these two reasons why we cannot formulate a universal curriculum for kindergartners. In the first place, the kindergarten must take up and use the experience the child has already met; and in the second place, it must supplement the home. It might be possible and desirable to work out type curricula for well-to-do country village homes, for industrial centers like Manchester, for congested slum districts, and for fashionable city homes. Where life is so fluid, however, as it is with little children, it must generally be better for the teacher to be well grounded in fundamental principles and then to work out a daily course of exercises, following the seasons, knitting her work on to daily experience and filling out the acreage of interest and need, not cultivated by the home. To do this, she must be well acquainted with the development of little children, she must have a vivid and complete philosophy of life, and she must be trained to think of her institution as one of several, all working to give the children life more abundantly.

The older school of kindergartners will say that in all this I have touched but the surface of the subject. They will say that this world of ours is knit together in a sane and comprehensible system and that the teacher of little children should always have this final scheme of things in mind and should present in the

exercises and games types of universal and eternal excellence. They will tell me that only a great philosopher can see these universals in types and that Frederick Froebel has done this work for us and has given us a permanent frame work of symbolic exercises that we must be content to follow.

To this I can only reply that I doubt the finality of any interpretation of life. The theology of Froebel's day has largely disappeared; as Christian Scientist, as Agnostic, or as a Catholic, I must work over again my conception of the Eternal Cause of all things and of my relation to him. The political absolutism of Froebel's day, surrounded by French Revolution ideas, is giving place to something that looks more and more like cosmopolitan socialism. The formal modes of thought of the earlier nineteenth century have given way to investigation guided by hypothesis; and the next great synthesis may very well care less for form and color and more for spirit and life.

For myself, I am content to study the past in the light of present needs, to live in the present and hope forward. This is a time of transition and I do not dare chain my mind to any dogma. At the same time I realize the danger of going on without a definite sense of where I am going. I may waste my life and the lives of the children intrusted to me in an idle quest, but such is life. I cannot return to fixed dogmas in religion nor in politics—why should I in education?